

The gladiatorial show started with a grand parade with the gladiators riding in chariots to the arena dressed in gold and purple robes. Brass and wind instruments and a hydraulic organ supplied the music.

Who were the gladiators? Those who were put in no-hope situations in the arena were criminals who had been condemned to death. The proper gladiators, on the other hand, had at least a little hope. If they survived long enough, they would win their freedom, or they might be given it after a particularly impressive performance. And they could gain an enormous following, especially among the female members of the crowd. Some of them were criminals condemned to the gladiatorial schools; others were slaves, often prisoners of war, who had been sold to them; and some were free citizens who had enrolled voluntarily or been forced to do so by economic necessity. When they signed on, they swore: 'I undertake to be burnt by fire, to be bound in chains, to be beaten, to die by the sword.' These bleak words are appropriate to an activity which goes back to ancient funeral rituals where fights to the finish were staged as a blood offering to the dead.

In the arena they were variously armed and matched against differently equipped opponents. Here we describe three of them. The heavy-armed Samnite carried a large oblong shield, a sword or spear. His head was protected by a visored helmet, his right leg by a greave and his right arm by a protective sleeve. The Thraex also wore a helmet, carried a light shield and was armed with a reversed sickle. The light-footed *rētiārius* fought bare-headed, wore a tunic and was armed with a three-pronged trident and a dagger, and a net to trap his adversary.

If a gladiator was at his opponent's mercy, the crowd would express passionate judgement as to whether he should be finished off. Thumbs down probably meant that his opponent should drop his weapon and spare him, thumbs pointed to one's own chest probably meant kill him. The president of the games would almost always fall in with popular sentiment. The winner received a crown and prize money, and an attendant with the mask of Mercury, the god who escorted souls to the underworld, came on with a hot iron to make sure that the victim was really dead. Boys covered the pools of blood with clean sand.

Brutality did not stop here. Two criminals might be driven into the arena, only one of them armed. And wild beasts were matched against each other or against humans. Vast hunts were staged in which huge numbers of exotic animals were exterminated. (In 80 AD when the emperor Titus inaugurated Rome's famous amphitheatre, the Colosseum, 5,000 wild beasts were killed in a single day.) Incense-burners were set out to overcome the smell of the animals, and slaves would spray clouds of perfume at the audience as they sat under the shade of an awning that covered the entire circle of the amphitheatre.

gladiators

